

Seeking strength in numbers

Postdocs are vital to scientific research, but often miss out on the benefits available to permanent staff. Now they are banding together to improve their situation, says Karen Kreeger.

A decade ago, riled by low stipends and poor healthcare benefits, postdocs at Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore, Maryland, banded together to do something about them. Since then, dozens of similar grass-roots postdoc associations have emerged at other universities, along with organizations for postdocs that are funded and staffed by the institutions themselves. How much have these groups achieved and how effective are they in bettering the postdoc's lot?

The Johns Hopkins postdoc association tries to answer these questions through regular surveys. The most recent, in late 2001, canvassed the 1,235 postdocs working in the medical school. It found that 60% would encourage or strongly encourage others to take up a fellowship at Johns Hopkins. This is pretty good, considers Carol Manahan, president of the postdoctoral association for the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. And she confesses herself surprised at this level of satisfaction.

The respondents' top concern was salaries. At the time of the survey, Johns Hopkins had yet to achieve the salary standards for postdocs set out in guidelines from the National Institutes of Health, but it has since implemented the recommended minimum salaries (see *Naturejobs* 5; 10 January 2002). The next four most pressing concerns were, in order, future job placement, parking, childcare and healthcare benefits. Manahan says that the association is now working to obtain more comprehensive healthcare cover.

committees set up by the council, "the biggest one we have going on now is the foreign postdoc committee". Because foreign postdocs tend to be "isolated in a lab", says Pappas, one of the council's goals is to bring them together socially, whether that is by hosting pot-luck dinners with relevant administrative departments or by organizing a soccer team.

WIDENING HORIZONS

Postdocs at the University of California (UC) have taken their cause state-wide. In late 2001, they set up the UC Council of Postdoctoral Scholars to tackle problems that could not be solved by any single campus. Take job descriptions. On the ten UC campuses "there were as many as eight different job titles for postdocs, with the accompanying differences in benefits and salaries", says Raymond Clark, chair of the council and a postdoc at UC, San Diego. After the council's intervention there are now just two. The next issue in the council's sights is a uniform benefits and salary structure for postdocs throughout the university.

Last spring, postdocs even went national, forming the National Postdoctoral Association to advocate best-practice policies. "It was very much a grassroots effort," says Orfeu Buxton, a postdoc at the University of Chicago who is on the association's steering committee together with Manahan. "There are certain problems that are national in scope, and at a local level intractable," explains Buxton. He cites as examples the lack of clarity in the

US tax code regarding postdocs and the lack of consistency between funding agencies, which can generate disparities in salaries between, and even within, labs.

Since March 2002, the National Postdoctoral Association has established collaborations with the Association of American Universities and Sigma Xi among others. "We're not proposing anything socialist," says Buxton wryly. "It's just that some rationality would help. So rather than wailing into the wind, there's a huge amount of action going on about postdocs, and we could add a national focusing voice."

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John Pappas
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POSTDOCS FROM OVERSEAS

Half the postdocs at Johns Hopkins come from outside the United States, and the survey revealed that they emphasize different issues from their US counterparts. As well as the obvious problems of a language barrier and visa difficulties, postdocs from overseas seemed to be less well paid on average, and they put communication difficulties and conflicts with their principal investigator higher on their lists of problems.

The concerns of foreign postdocs are also high on the agenda of the Biomedical Postdoctoral Council at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. John Pappas, a postdoc in the microbiology department and co-chairman of the council, says that, of the issue-led

Web links

National Postdoctoral Association

♦ www.nationalpostdoc.org

Johns Hopkins School of Medicine Postdoctoral Association

♦ www.med.jhu.edu/jhpda

National Postdoctoral Association Steering Committee

♦ www.nationalpostdoc.org

University of California, Berkeley, Postdoctoral Association

♦ postdoc.berkeley.edu/content_home.html

University of California Council of Postdoctoral Scholars

♦ www.psa.ucsd.edu/policies

University of Chicago, biological sciences postdoc association board

♦ pda.bsd.uchicago.edu

University of Pennsylvania biomedical postdoctoral programmes

♦ www.med.upenn.edu/postdoc